

The Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company

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The state of Illinois is often viewed as an industrial magnet of the United States. From its vast prairies to its busy cities, Illinois has always stood prominently as a passageway for entrepreneurs to embark on a revolutionary journey. In 1904 a small group of businessmen living in Belleville set out on such a venture when they decided to pool their resources and create the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company. Little did they envision that, in the century that followed, their product would build a bridge from the past to the present, from Belleville to the rest of the world.

Today Belleville, Illinois is a diverse community of nearly 45,000 located about fifteen miles southeast of St. Louis, Missouri. From the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, it was a city that was populated largely by first, second and third generation German immigrants. With new businesses emerging on every corner and local leaders praising the town's progressive attitude towards industrialization, Belleville rapidly expanded. Many reputable industries sprung up in and around the area such as stove factories, mills, brick making, carriage manufacturing, coal mining and breweries.

In the midst of the enthusiasm that filled the town, German investors, Adolph Knobeloch, H. E. Leunig, Joseph Reis, James Rentchler, and William Weidmann, decided to open the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company. Although Reis was named president, Weidmann, the company's secretary-treasurer, introduced the idea of a shoe factory. The company began production in the former Rentchler machine shops at East B and Delmar Streets. Weidmann had found the investors for his shoemaking venture.

One of eight children of a German immigrant couple, William Weidmann, was born in Belleville. His parents had migrated to the area during the second half of the nineteenth century. William married Caroline Leunig. The couple had two sons, William and Walter. In the same year that Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company was incorporated, Walter graduated from the St. Louis Manual Training School. Shortly afterward, he joined the company as the operations manager.

Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company continued to prosper, and soon outgrew its original site, which had started out with an investment of \$15,000 and with twenty-five workers. On June 1, 1909, the company purchased the land which the Jordan Shoe Company once occupied. It was on the corner of Walnut and Main Streets before being destroyed in a fire a year earlier. Officials of the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company made plans to build a modern shoe factory at once. Four years later, the complex expanded again, after more land was purchased. An addition was built on Walnut Street directly behind the factory. The labor force at the facility increased to 200 workers who manufactured thousands of pairs of shoes daily.

In 1913, as the labor movement quickly swept the nation, the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company was also involved. The company's employees began to take steps towards establishing their first union. Conflict arose as two unions contended to claim the two hundred workers that the company employed. The disputes between the two unions grew so intense that fights began to emerge within the community. As a result a riot erupted on Jackson and B Streets in November. One man was shot and three were stabbed, none of whom happened to be shoe factory workers. As trouble brewed,

Walter Weidmann, with the help of American labor leader Samuel Gompers finally settled the controversy.

In its beginnings, the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company produced everyday footwear for men and boys, but this soon changed as World War I brought an increase in the demand for goods for military use. During the war, the company produced its first line of combat boots. However, not all affects of the war were positive. The heavy work load required caused some workers to be more vulnerable to disease. This was obvious in 1918 when the building had to be evacuated and decontaminated due to a worker that had been stricken with smallpox in the plant.

When the war ended in 1918, the business went back to producing more than twenty-five styles of shoes fit for “men, boys, and little gents.” During this time the factory became the first in the Belleville area to offer work incentives and reward daily attendance with profit bonuses and life insurance policies.

The Great Depression cast a shadow over the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company as it celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. At this time, the company proudly employed three hundred people and made about two thousand pairs of shoes on a daily basis. However as the Depression progressed, like many companies in that day, Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company struggled.

However, for nearly a decade, economic conditions were not good. As the United States approached World War II, the government began to award military contracts to produce military footwear that enabled Walter Weidmann to lead the plant successfully out of the Great Depression, and into prosperity. Additional military contracts as the

result of World War II brought the factory back to the heavy production that it once held during World War I.

For continued on-time delivery throughout World War II, Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company earned the coveted Army/Navy “E” award when the war ended. During this time period a strong relationship was forged between the armed forces and Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company. This permitted the company to claim it was “the United States’ oldest and largest supplier of military footwear.” Even today, the company provides a continual flow of military boots to various branches of the nation’s armed forces.

Although Walter Weidmann led the company in the 1950s, he soon handed his position to his son Homer, who directed the company through the mid-1980s. However, administration was not the only change that challenged the company during this time. In terms of its dress shoe production line, from the 1950s and up until the 1970s, the business experienced significant declines. Hence, in the early 1960s Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company redirected its efforts towards sports shoes. Track, baseball, and football shoes all bearing a ‘Belleville’ trademark were marketed under the name of Rawlings Sporting Goods Company of St. Louis. The company supplied most of the baseball shoes worn in the major leagues, as well as a large percentage of shoes worn by professional football players, and Olympic track stars.

During the mid-1980s due to an increase of foreign shoe imports of all types into the nation, but especially sports shoes, the company began to focus exclusively on military products. Production needs called for additional space and specialized heavy equipment to produce large quantities of military shoes that the early-twentieth century

factory could not support. Rubber milling facilities, a vulcanizing process, and a need for an extensive automated conveyor system forced the consideration of a new plant. In 1986, a new 113,000 square-foot facility in Belleville's Belle Valley Industrial Park was completed to accommodate this production. The new facility allowed the company to produce superior products using the modular manufacturing system. The original factory, which today houses women and children in the midst of severe family turmoil, was donated to the Women's Crisis Center of Metro East.

Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company entered the early 1990s under the direction of William Weidmann's great-grandson, Eric R. Weidmann, the current president of the company. Operation Desert Storm called for Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company to once again supply the military with large amounts of footwear. The design and material of the traditional black all-leather combat boot was changed to suit the conditions of the Persian Gulf. A desert-colored, suede and nylon boot with insulation to protect against the desert heat was created and shipped out in record time. With only 300 workers, the company turned out 3,000 pairs of shoes a day. The new boot received praise from defense officials who were impressed with the quantity, quality and on-time delivery. Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company was the recipient of the Defense Quality Excellence Award in 1991 and the company was named the Prime Contractor of the Year for 1993.

After the Persian Gulf War, the workforce of the factory was cut to about 225 workers and production cut down to about 1,500 pairs of boots daily. For the first time in its history, the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company went to selling combat boots directly to the public when it joined the electronic marketplace in 1998. The company's

newly designed website, www.bellevilleshoe.com, allowed the public to buy at the below market-market price of \$99.95 plus shipping. The strategy opened a new market for the firm. By direct selling, the business was allowed to offer a lower price for boots and hence attracted hunters, fishers, and people who were on their feet most of the day to purchase shoes under the standard cost of \$140.

In 2000, when the Marine Corps decided that it needed a new generation of infantry combat boots, Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company was awarded the first contract, which was worth \$3 million for 36,000 pairs of boots. The company developed a boot that was made from Gor-Tex, which helped keep water out of the shoe and had a tri-layer system sole, the durability of a combat boot, and the flexibility of a running shoe. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the company's boot production increased from 1,700 pairs of boots a day to 2,400 and the number of employees increased from 250 to 430. A \$5.3-million contract from the Defense Logistics Agency dictated that the factory produce boots for the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. In December 2001, the business began using a new machine that helped meet production demands by putting soles on the boots more quickly.

In spring of 2002 the company entered a five-year contract with the military, which meant that the company needed more space and employees to manufacture boots. Hence, it reopened the DeWitt shoe plant in Arkansas that had closed four months earlier. Named Belleville Shoe South, the plant continues to employ 650 people, pumping \$12 million in wages into the local economy annually.

In this, its second century of production, Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company is the largest supplier of military boots to the country's armed forces. With two plants,

one in Belleville, Illinois, and one in DeWitt, Arkansas, the company produces over 8,000 pairs of boots every day and more than 1,000,000 pairs of boots annually.

Wherever the United States military forces have walked, Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company has been on duty. [From Alvin Nebelsick, *History of Belleville*; *Belleville Daily Advocate*, Nov. 10, 1904, June 1, 1909, Apr. 25, Nov. 15, 1913, Mar. 28, 1918, Mar. 20, 1920, Dec. 20, 1929; *The Belleville News Democrat*, Aug. 11, 1961, July 1, 2005; *The St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Feb. 13, 1991; *St. Louis Business Journal*, Oct. 2, 1998, Dec. 28, 2001; (*Belleville News Democrat*), “Products made here to be sold around the world,” <http://www.belleville.com/mld/belleville/news/local/12443774.htm> (Aug. 28, 2005); The Library of Congress, “Recognizing the 100th Anniversary of the Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company – (Extension of Remarks – October 04, 2004),” <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?r108:3:./temp/~r108t2NIGG>: (Aug. 28, 2005); The Library of Congress, “Tribute to Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company – Hon. Jerry F. Costello (Extension of Remarks – May 19, 1993),” <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?r103:E19MY3-44>: (Aug. 28, 2005); Belleville Shoe Manufacturing Company, “Belleville Shoe Quality Boot Workmanship,” http://www.bellevilleshoe.com/public/public_9.htm (Aug. 28, 2005); St. Louis Today, “Budgets and Population,” <http://images.stltoday.com/stltoday/resources/firebudget.pdf> (Aug. 28, 2005); Labor & Industry Museum “Belleville History,” <http://www.laborandindustrymuseum.org/BellevilleHistory.shtml> (Aug. 28, 2005).]